DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 177 408 CG 013 836

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TITLE Counseling the Appalachian Youth: Strategies and Techniques.
PUB DATE Apr 79
NOTE 10p.

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Attitudes; *Community Health Services; *Counseling Services; Counselor Acceptance; *Counselor Attitudes; Counselor Role; *Interaction; Rural Areas; *Rural Youth
IDENTIFIERS *Appalachia

ABSTRACT

Providing counseling services to clients in rural areas entails special problems that are particularly unique to rural areas, such as geographic isolation, general suspiciousness toward outsiders, and community resistance to agency services. In order to effectively relate to rural Appalachians, counselors must be sensitive to the rural population's needs, values, and norms, and also aware of their own attitudes toward rural inhabitants. Some basic strategies which counselors should consider in the development of counseling services include the following: (1) defining the counselor role in less "counselor-client" terms by acting as a teacher or vocational advisor; (2) seeing clients in their own settings and leisure activities; (3) being less formal and structured while counseling; (4) involving the client's whole family; (5) becoming part of the community; and (6) using local individuals as assistants where possible. (HIM)

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Counseling the Appalachian Youth: Strategies and Techniques

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COUNSELING THE APPALACHIAN YOUTH

STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES

Even though the United States is one of the most urbanized nations in the world, nearly one third (66 million) of America's population can be considered rural. The rural population is dispersed and diverse and includes among others the migrant workers in California, Texas, and Florida, the Native American Indians in Arizona, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and California, the people of Spanish origin in the Southwest, the Native Alaskans, and the Appalachians.

The Appalachian region, which has a total population of approximately 20 million, includes all of West Virginia and portions of 12 other eastern states. For the region as a whole, one quarter of the people live in poverty and in some states, i.e., Kentucky and Mississippi, the percentage of families living in poverty is as high as 39 percent and 34 percent respectively. Likewise, literacy in Appalachia is below the national average and underemployment, economic exploitation, migration, and lack of opportunity are prevalent. Though the incidence of these problems is higher in rural areas, traditionally these regions have received a lower per capita share of the Federal dollars designed to meet these problems than have the more urban areas.

In the past few years, there has been an increasing awareness of and concern about the problems effecting Appalachia and some progress has been made. The Appalachian Regional Commission has supported many programs designed to improve the health, education, and opportunites of both children and adults in Appalachia and health, educational levels

and competencies, and economic conditions are improving and opportunities are increasing. While inroads have been made, progress has been slow. A primary reason for this are the special problems unique to rural Appalachia.

This paper describes these special problems as well as strategies and techniques that can be useful in providing counseling services to the rural Appalachian youth.

The Problem

Providing counseling services to clients in rural areas entails special problems that are particularly unique to rural areas. These problems make it difficult to provide services in these areas. Although somewhat interrelated, these problems can be categorized as those related to the geographic isolation of the region and those related to the cultural and psychological characteristics of the population.

Geographic Isolation. The Appalachian region covers a large geographic area and in most regions the population is sparse. The per capita income is low with the result that little tax money is available to provide services. Yet costs are often greater than in urban areas due to an increase in staff time that must be spent in travel to reach remotely located clients or in transporting them to a central location. The urban alternative of public transportation is lacking in these areas and in the winter time any means of travel may be impossible on the ice and snow covered mountain roads. These problems are compounded by a relatively small staff to begin with, due to the limited financial resources as well as the lack of trained staff willing to live in these remote rural areas. Already limited resources become even more limited because of the geographic characteristics of the region.

Cultural/Psychological Characteristics. Another major obstacle to providing counseling services to youth in rural areas is community resistance to these services and there are several related reasons for this resistance. At least partly out of necessity, the Appalachians are fiercely independent and individualistic. Traditionally, they have handled their own difficulties without outside help. To ask for help goes counter to the cultural norm and there is a stigma attached to asking for help and being labelled as unable to handle problems without help. This stigma is probably real as well as perceived.

Added to this is a general suspiciousness toward outsiders and negative experiences in the past with other agency persons. All of these factors contribute to the difficulty of providing counseling services in this rural Appalachian region.

The Strategies

There are some basic strategies that can be used to meet these obstacles and thereby achieve community acceptance and deliver services to a scattered population. The alternatives deviate from more traditional counseling techniques which,though effective with other groups, do not work so well for the rural client.

One basic strategy for overcoming community resistance concerns the counselors' definition of their own role. The counseling function should be viewed as more than a therapeutic one. The counselor may act as a teacher, vocational advisor, big sister or brother. Related to this is the suggestion that the counselor develop programs where people are less identified as clients. These might be discussion groups, career explora-

tion groups, or even classes on such topics as interpersonal communication, job seeking techniques, or marriage and family.

Another effective strategy is to see clients in their own settings and in conjunction with their leisure activities. These settings include the more structured but accepted institutions, i.e., school and church, as well as less structured situations such as the teen center, playground, swimming pool, and gymnasium.

If these strategies are used, the next suggestion, to be less formal and structured, and more personal, should occur easily. This strategy should also be practiced during counseling sessions that do take place in an office setting.

Another appropriate, but unique, activity for the counselor is to act as a liaison with other agencies with which the client needs to interact in order to translate and interpret the encounter for both parties.

The counselor should strive to become part of the community system as much as possible. Unless the counselor is a "native", he or she will always be an "outsider" to a certain extent, but attending church, school, and other community functions can go a long way toward narrowing the gap.

Another important suggestion is to involve the client's whole family. The Appalachian people are very much family-oriented and their cooperation is vital. It is recommended that the counselor minimize the paper work as much as possible, i.e., note taking, testing, the "we need it for the records" syndrome. These activities will tend to increase the client's suspiciousness. In addition, the relative noncompetive philosophy of the Appalachian people as well as cultural differences may invalidate any test

results. Instead a counselor might, in the case of vocational counseling for example, use work samples or job tryouts. These more action oriented approaches will appeal more to the client as well as giving a more realistic evaluation of his or her capabilities.

Another useful strategy for overcoming community resistance is to employ and train local people who are already known and accepted in the community. These persons may be paraprofessionals under supervision of a professional and may work out of a satellite location that is nearer the client group rather than out of a central office. Costs would be reduced in terms of salaries and travel time. In addition, the use of these community aids will mean more clients can be served.

Outcomes

Particularly in mental health, prevention is preferable to treatment. However, due to the factors described previously, problems frequently remain hidden until they have become more major and difficult to treat. By implementing the stategies described above, persons will be reached at an earlier stage with the probable result that their difficulties will be less severe and therefore respond more readily to treatment. In addition, using these more informal, less structured approaches will result in counseling being seen as a more natural process as well as respectful of the individual and his or her values and interests.

The counselor who uses these strategies may have difficulty separating personal and professional roles and the community aids' loyalties may be with the clients rather than the counselor. Although these might be viewed as negative outcomes, neither is seen as necessarily bad. If the counselor

recognizes these possible outcomes, he or she should be able to deal with them.

Conclusions

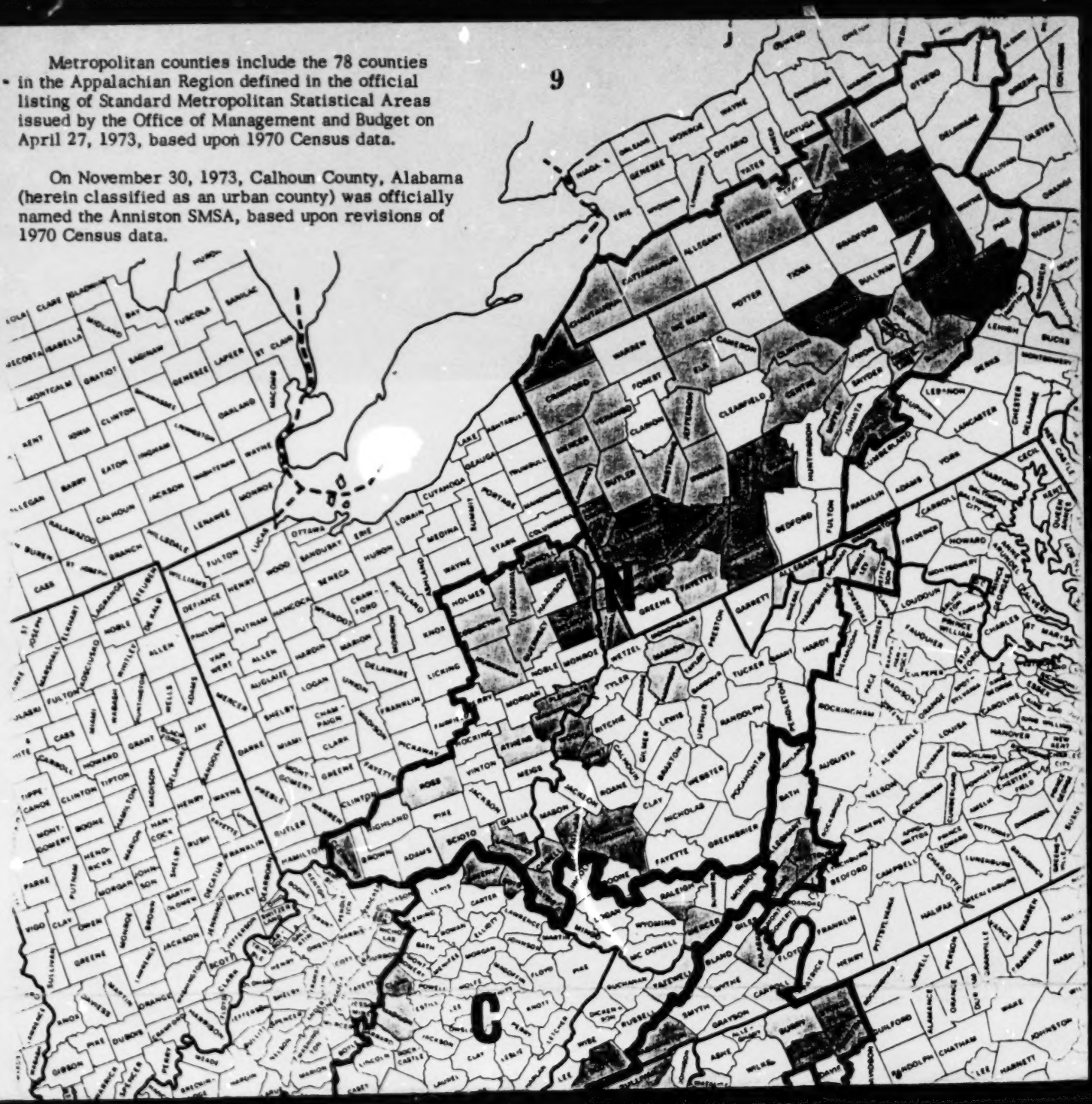
In order to relate effectively to rural Appalachians, several rather basic things must be remembered that are true to some extent in dealing with any client from any culture. The counselor must be sensitive to the needs of the rural people and understand their values, norms, and customs. The counselor must be aware of his or her own attitudes toward these people and also understand the impact that counseling services can have. The counseling experience must reflect the experiences of the client and his or her expectations.

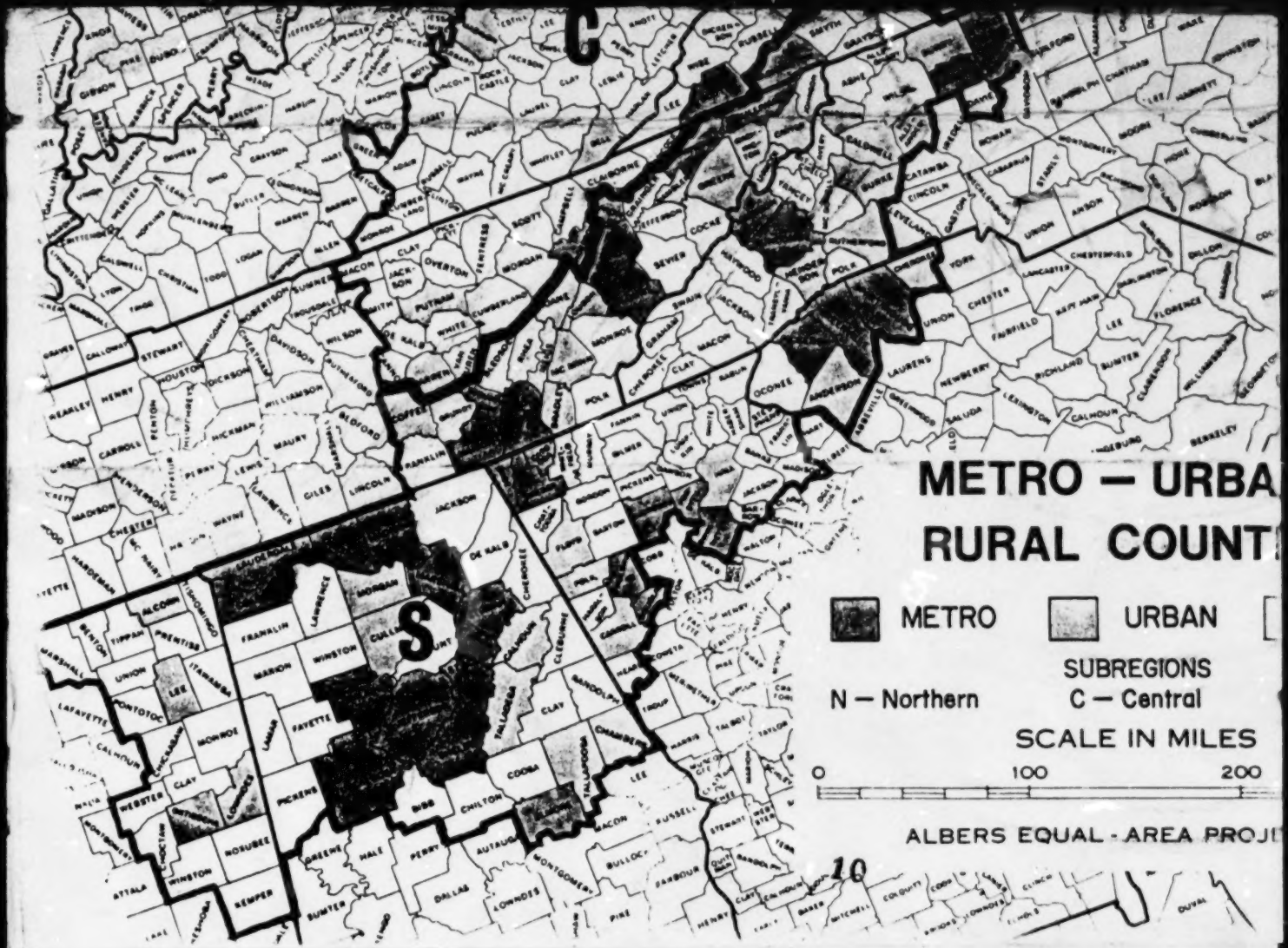
It has been said by some that a counselor who is not from a similar cultural background cannot establish and maintain an effective relationship with a client. The reasons given include the language barrier, the middle-class values of the counselor, the client's distrust, and the client's inability to deviate from the cultural norm of not seeking help. If, however, the counselor takes the time and makes the effort to "meet the Appalachian client on his own territory" and gains some knowledge of, understanding of, and appreciation for the client's culture and lifestyle, he or she will be able to relate effectively to the rural client.

There are a number of specific strategies and techniques that can be used to overcome the two most serious obstacles to providing counseling services to rural Appalachian youth-community resistance and geographic isolation. This paper has detailed the problems resulting from this resistance and isolation as well as proposed techniques that can be using in imlementing counseling services in remote rural regions.

Metropolitan counties include the 78 counties in the Appalachian Region defined in the official listing of Standard Metropolitan Statistical Areas issued by the Office of Management and Budget on April 27, 1973, based upon 1970 Census data.

On November 30, 1973, Calhoun County, Alabama (herein classified as an urban county) was officially named the Anniston SMSA, based upon revisions of 1970 Census data.

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